

ARE NUNS HUMAN?



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IN the year 1616 a little French peasant girl approached St. Jane Frances de Chantal and asked to be admitted into her community as a lay sister. She could neither read nor write, and because she was so naive the nuns laughingly named her Sister Simplicienne. "My uncle sent me here," she told them. "He says I am not smart enough to live in the world in the fear of



God because I believe and do everything that is told me." Among other things she had been told that the religious life was a heavenly one, and she took the words literally. Imagine her amazement when she saw

the Sisters eating in the refectory. "I didn't know nuns had to eat like people," she gasped, "I was told they lived like angels."

We may well laugh at Sister Simplicienne. Of course none of us would be so gullible. But do you realize that there are Episcopalians today who have never heard of monks and nuns in the Episcopal Church? Even many otherwise well-informed Church members have surprisingly hazy notions as to what the religious life is all about. Until our people have more understanding and sympathy for the religious life, our religious communities cannot grow the way they ought, neither can they accomplish to the full their work for God and the Church.



Monks and nuns are not essentially different from other people, nor is the religious life something apart from the Christian life. It is the

Christian life lived on an intensive plane. If we wish to be technical we may say that a religious is a person who has made certain vows to God and who lives in a community under obedience to a rule and a superior. But all Christians



have made certain vows to God. We call them baptismal vows. The three religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are really an intensification of the three vows which every Christian makes at the font.

The Christian life is normally a family life. The religious, too, has her family — her community. One may say that in this respect her life is human only more so for she has, as it were, to marry the whole community. She must learn to live with and to love all her sisters whether they are congenial or not. There are many opportunities for the give and take of human relationships in the life of a nun.

Why does a woman enter a convent anyway? Certainly not because her heart is broken, or be-



cause she can't hold a job, or because she is a misfit in the world. Not at all. Such a person would not thrive long under monastic discipline. No, there is only

one reason, the same reason that is back of every human action. She does it because she wants to. It is this feeling of attraction which God puts into the heart of the aspirant that

we call vocation. But the attraction alone is not enough. There must be a fitness for the life and



this is determined only after a period of actual testing and training which we call the novitiate. To eat well, to sleep well and to laugh often, these are three signs of a true vocation. But after all, aren't these the signs of a good adjustment in any happy, healthy human life?

Occasionally well-meaning people feel sorry for us religious. They conceive of our life as something very stupid and monotonous and they ask dolefully, "What

do you do all day long?"

The answer is obvious. We do exactly the same kind of things that human beings are doing the world over. We get up in the morning and we say our prayers. We cook and wash dishes and sweep floors. We read and study and write letters. We

wash and iron and sew

and mend. We work in the garden. We entertain guests. We instruct people in the faith, and we comfort souls in distress. In between times we say more prayers. At our daily recreation we have a jolly visit together over a cup of tea. And when evening comes we are ready for a good night's sleep. The nun's life is well rounded. Worship and work, play and rest, all have their part in her day. And aren't these characteristic of any balanced human life?

Sometimes we religious get weary of our human burdens just as human beings are apt to do. Sometimes we wish we were more like the angels. We go to the pantry shelves and find them bare. We go to the alms box and find it empty. We begin to think that it would be very, very pleasant if Sister Simplissime had been right.

But after all, it is a thrilling thing to be a human being, isn't it?

